

Prewar Assessment on Iraq Saw Chance of Strong Divisions

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Correction Appended

WASHINGTON, Sept. 27 - The same intelligence unit that produced a gloomy report in July about the prospect of growing instability in Iraq warned the Bush administration about the potential costly consequences of an American-led invasion two months before the war began, government officials said Monday.

The estimate came in two classified reports prepared for President Bush in January 2003 by the National Intelligence Council, an independent group that advises the director of central intelligence. The assessments predicted that an American-led invasion of Iraq would increase support for political Islam and would result in a deeply divided Iraqi society prone to violent internal conflict.

One of the reports also warned of a possible insurgency against the new Iraqi government or American-led forces, saying that rogue elements from Saddam Hussein's government could work with existing terrorist groups or act independently to wage guerrilla warfare, the officials said. The assessments also said a war would increase sympathy across the Islamic world for some terrorist objectives, at least in the short run, the officials said.

The contents of the two assessments had not been previously disclosed. They were described by the officials after two weeks in which the White House had tried to minimize the council's latest report, which was prepared this summer and read by senior officials early this month.

Last week, Mr. Bush dismissed the latest intelligence reports, saying its authors were "just guessing" about the future, though he corrected himself later, calling it an "estimate."

The assessments, meant to address the regional implications and internal challenges that Iraq would face after Mr. Hussein's ouster, said it was unlikely that Iraq would split apart after an American invasion, the officials said. But they said there was a significant chance that domestic groups would engage in violent internal conflict with one another unless an occupying force prevented them from doing so.

Senior White House officials, including Condoleezza Rice, the national security adviser, have contended that some of the early predictions provided to the White House by outside experts of what could go wrong in Iraq, including secular strife, have not come to pass. But President

Bush has acknowledged a "miscalculation" about the virulency of the insurgency that would rise against the American occupation, though he insisted that it was simply an outgrowth of the speed of the initial military victory in 2003.

The officials outlined the reports after the columnist Robert Novak, in a column published Monday in The Washington Post, wrote that a senior intelligence official had said at a West Coast gathering last week that the White House had disregarded warnings from intelligence agencies that a war in Iraq would intensify anti-American hostility in the Muslim world. Mr. Novak identified the official as Paul R. Pillar, the national intelligence officer for the Near East and South Asia, and criticized him for making remarks that Mr. Novak said were critical of the administration.

The National Intelligence Council is an independent group, made up of outside academics and long-time intelligence professionals. The C.I.A. describes it as the intelligence community's "center for midterm and long-term strategic thinking." Its main task is to produce National Intelligence Estimates, the most formal reports outlining the consensus of intelligence agencies. But it also produces less formal assessments, like the ones about Iraq it presented in January 2003.

One of the intelligence documents described the building of democracy in Iraq as a long, difficult and potentially turbulent process with potential for backsliding into authoritarianism, Iraq's traditional political model, the officials said.

The assessments were described by three government officials who have seen or been briefed on the documents. The officials spoke on condition that neither they nor their agencies be identified. None of the officials are affiliated in any way with the campaigns of Mr. Bush or Senator John Kerry. The officials, who were interviewed separately, declined to quote directly from the documents, but said they were speaking out to present an accurate picture of the prewar warnings.

The officials' descriptions portray assessments that are gloomier than the predictions by some administration officials, most notably those of Vice President Dick Cheney. But in general, the warnings about anti-American sentiment and instability appear to have been upheld by events, and their disclosure could prove politically damaging to the White House, which has already had to contend with the disclosure that the National Intelligence Estimate prepared by the council in July presented a far darker prognosis for Iraq through the end of 2005 than Mr. Bush has done in his statements.

The reports issued by the intelligence council are of two basic types: those that try to assess intelligence data, like the October 2002 document that assessed the state of Iraq's unconventional weapons programs, and broader predictions about foreign political developments.

The group's National Intelligence Estimate about Iraqi weapons has now been widely discredited for wildly overestimating the country's capabilities. Members of the intelligence

council have complained that they were pressured to write the document too quickly and that important qualifiers were buried.

The group's recent National Intelligence Estimate, prepared in July this year, with its gloomy picture of Iraq's future, was described by White House officials in the past two weeks as an academic document that contained little evidence and little that was new.

"It was finished in July, and not circulated by the intelligence community until the end of August," said one senior administration official. "That's not exactly what you do with an urgent document."

Mr. Pillar, who has held his post since October 2000, is highly regarded within the C.I.A. But he has been a polarizing figure within the administration, particularly within the Defense Department, where senior civilians who were among the most vigorous champions of a war in Iraq derided him as being too dismissive of the threat posed by Mr. Hussein.

A C.I.A. spokesman said Monday that Mr. Pillar was not available for comment and that his comments at the West Coast session had been made on the condition that he not be identified. An intelligence official said Mr. Pillar had supervised the drafting of the document, but the official emphasized that it reflected the views of 15 intelligence agencies, including the Defense Intelligence Agency, the National Security Agency, and the State Department's bureau of Intelligence and Research.

A spokesman for the National Security Council, Sean McCormack, said Monday that "we don't comment on intelligence and classified reports," and he would not say whether Mr. Bush had read the January 2003 reports. But he said "the president was fully aware of all the challenges prior to making the decision to go to war, and we addressed these challenges in our policies."

"And we also addressed these challenges in public," he added.

A senior administration official likened Mr. Bush's decision to a patient's decision to have risky surgery, even if doctors warn that there could be serious side effects. "We couldn't live with the status quo," the official said, "because as a result of the status quo in the Middle East, we were dying, and we saw the evidence of that on Sept. 11."

Officials who have read the July 2004 National Intelligence Estimate have said that even as a best-case situation, it predicted a period of tenuous stability for Iraq between now and the end of 2005. The worst of three cases cited in the document was that developments could lead to civil war, the officials have said. Some Democratic senators have asked that the document be declassified, but administration officials have called that prospect unlikely.

The White House has also sought to minimize the significance of the estimate, with Mr. Bush saying that intelligence agencies had laid out "several scenarios that said, life could be lousy, life could be O.K. or life could be better, and they were just guessing as to what the conditions

might be like." Mr. Bush later corrected himself, saying that he should have used the word estimate.

Democrats have contrasted the dark tone of the intelligence report with the more upbeat descriptions of Iraq's prospects offered by the administration. The White House has defended its approach, saying that it is the job of intelligence analysts to identify challenges, and the job of policy makers to overcome them. But administration officials have also emphasized that the White House was not given a copy of the document until Aug. 31, only about two weeks before it was made public by The New York Times.

In an interview on "Fox News Sunday," Secretary of State Colin L. Powell acknowledged that "we have seen an increase in anti-Americanism in the Muslim world" since the war began. Mr. Powell also said the insurgency in Iraq was "getting worse" as forces opposed to the United States and the new Iraqi leadership remained "determined to disrupt the election" set for January.

Correction: September 29, 2004, Wednesday A front-page article yesterday about prewar intelligence assessments on Iraq misidentified the television program on which Secretary of State Colin L. Powell discussed them on Sunday. It was ABC's "This Week," not "Fox News Sunday," on which he appeared the same day.

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